

Abington Human Relations Commission and Police Department

Program Summary: Walking While Black (February 2021)

This program included the first showing by the Abington HRC and PD of the film *Walking While Black: LOVE is the Answer*. After watching the film, the program included a guided discussion by all of the participants, including members of both sponsoring groups. In addition, AJ Ali, director and producer of the film, joined the group and participated in the discussion, greatly enhancing the experience for all. Before the screening, Ali reminded us that the purpose of the film is to encourage people to love themselves, their neighbors, their friends, and even their enemies. He said, “People hate because they fear and they fear [others] because they don’t know each other....Acknowledging [this] is a big step.”

After the film, the group was encouraged to respond to **four questions** provided by the film’s creators. **First: How did the film make you feel on a personal level?**

Participants commented that they were very moved by the film, that it was emotional and even difficult to watch, but that they were hopeful and positive by the end. Some, both lay people/civilians and police, said that they felt that their feelings had been “validated” by the film and added that they were working to make their community, and the world, a better place for their children and grandchildren. Personal examples of what some people have had to deal with because of racism and bias were discussed (i.e., a cross burning on an aunt’s lawn in Abington, someone calling the police because young African American Girl Scouts were selling their cookies – not in Abington – and the police responded by buying cookies!). Other participants reminded the group that since people don’t know what others are going through, everyone should try to “extend grace” to other people. This section of the discussion concluded with the comment that “America was built broken even though there were good intentions,” and an acknowledgement that the only way to bridge the gap between people is through discussions and getting to know people and that is not a one-time event.

The **second question** was: **How can police use the LOVE acronym to improve police-community relations? L=Learn; O=Open your heart; V=Volunteer; E=Empower others.**

Ali told the group something that his brother said to him on his deathbed: “LOVE takes work, time, effort, and commitment,” which was a moving and excellent place to begin this part of the discussion. Several members of the APD spoke very movingly about their commitment to the Abington community to talk to the people, learn about how they feel, and then put ideas that they hear into motion. They also said that experienced officers can and should be an influence and example for other members of the Department as well as for other police departments. When the observation surfaced that many people don’t really know what the APD is doing and more outreach, especially to young people, is needed, the response (from Deputy Chief Kelley Warner) was positive, agreeing that more such programs continuing the conversation are necessary.

Ali pointed out that there has been work in schools, colleges, and youth groups to promote meaningful dialogue in response to the film. He sees his job as empowering youth – giving them

the tools and then “getting out of the way.” Mentoring circles to support youth who are struggling with the four LOVE steps or people who are returning to the community after being incarcerated have been successfully formed.

There was a comment about a controversy in Abington School Board meetings about police patrolling in the schools with guns. People jumped to conclusions that people were uniformly negative to the APD, but that wasn’t an accurate picture of the situation. The conversation was “shut down,” so there is “a long way to go” on this issue. In one response, a police officer commented that, even if people have had negative experience with the police, it is possible to win them over if the police work to determine that they are “doing the right things, at the right times, for the right reasons.” This part of the discussion concluded with the comments that “the entire APD is about community policing, connecting with the community,” not just a small portion of the force. And, that the Department is committed to transparency and looking for truth in order to improve, even further, its work.

The third question was: How can community members use LOVE principles?

Interesting comments from both civilians and police officers pointed out that both sides need to work to learn more about the other and what they face in doing their jobs and living their lives. All people also need to be more cognizant of how they think about others; if someone immediately assumes “bad intent,” then they are more likely to have a bad interaction with someone. Officers pointed out that they can work to be even more involved in the community so that people see beyond the uniform, see them as people, and understand that policing “is a calling.” Concrete suggestions included putting something in the Township calendar that introduces members of the APD on a personal level, that it would be helpful to show the film in other venues such as churches/synagogues/mosques, and that it would also be useful to find ways for the police and the community to interact on a positive level when there isn’t a crises.

The fourth and final question was: What can we do as individuals?

A member of the Department said that he “takes this to heart when he’s training new recruits, trying to instill it in them, lead by example, and put the needs of the community before his own.” A community member commented about talking to one’s children from a very early age about racial issues and respecting people’s differences. Another response was that people should “make a paradigm shift in their lifestyle” and “make a commitment to being antiracist” because “silence is complicity.” The commitment should “cost you something” in order for there to be “equitable outcomes for everyone.” There was agreement that this is not easy work but should be encouraged.

Finally, Ali made a challenge grant to the Abington HRC, PD, and community: He will give \$500 toward a LOVE Garden in Abington if the community raises \$500. He explained about another Garden Grant where produce has been raised and provided to people who are food insecure. The immediate reaction is that Abington will take him up on his generous offer.